

Big stories about big squids: The story of the *Britannia* and the birth of a wartime urban legend

War in History
2021, Vol. 28(3) 562–582

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DOI: 10.1177/0968344519877664
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Abstract

A popular urban legend from World War II involves the survivors of a sunken British troopship being attacked by a giant squid. The story of R.E.G. Cox and the giant squid he claimed that attacked him can be found in a wide variety of written and online sources. This article explores the origins of this urban legend, looks at its spread, and debunks it through both historiographical research and a brief scientific examination of relevant marine life.

Keywords

R.E.G. Cox, *Britannia*, giant squid, urban legend, World War II, maritime history

‘I wonder if our arm-chair experts would have the courage of going to the hero of this
atrocious adventure and, in their usual know-it-all manner, claim that stories
of aggression of people by squids are only old wives’ tales!’

Bernard Heuvelmans, *The Kraken and The Colossal Octopus*

I. Introduction

In the 1991 sea-monster novel *Beast* by Peter Benchley, the aptly named hero ‘Whip’ Darling must confront a giant squid that is preying upon the denizens of Bermuda. While researching giant squids with a companion, ‘Whip’ uncovers a horrifying story from World War II:

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Twelve torpedoed sailors in a lifeboat. It was overloaded, and a couple of them had to hang overboard. The first night, in pitch-darkness, there was a scream, and one of the men was gone. Second night, same thing. So now they all crowded into the boat. The third night, they heard a scratching noise on the gunwale, and they smelled something. Well, it seems that the giant squid had been following them – staying down during the day and coming up at night – was feeling around with one of his whips. It touched one of the men, snapped around him fast as lightning and hauled him overboard. Now they knew what it was, and the next night they were ready for it, so when the whip came up and started hunting, they jumped on it and cut it off, but not before one of the men got beat up pretty bad. The squid went away, never came back. The guy who got beat up, they found he'd had pieces of flesh torn away the size of an American quarter.¹

Beast is, of course, a work of fiction. However, Benchley's story of the 12 torpedoed sailors and the squid that attacked them is based on an event that is purported to have happened in real life. In 1941, a second Lieutenant in the Indian Army named R.E.G. Cox was adrift at sea with 11 other survivors from the sunken ship *Britannia*. Cox claimed that during his time in the water, a giant squid took one man off the raft, and then attacked him. Luckily, the squid released its grip on Cox, who was later picked up by a Spanish ship and brought to a port in neutral Spain, where he was treated for his grievous injuries. Cox would later point to scars he had, as well as two contemporary newspaper articles, as proof of the encounter.

The story of Cox's squid would first appear in writing via Frank Lane's 1960 book, *Kingdom of the Octopus*. Later, it would be repeated by the famous French zoologist Bernard Heuvelmans twice: in his most famous work *In the Wake of Sea Serpents*, and more extensively in his book dedicated to the topic of giant squids, *The Kraken and the Colossal Octopus*. The famous science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke would be the next to relay the story, going so far as to conduct live interviews with Cox's friends and family on the TV program *Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World*, first broadcast in 1980. The TV series was accompanied by a book of the same name, with paperbacks published as late as 1985.

The Cox story appears in several works between 2003 and 2009. The first book is the 2003 *Man-Eaters* by British author Michael Bright. Bright describes Cox's story, noting the evidence of Cox's scars and observing that, 'While several fanciful reports in tabloid newspapers tell of monster squid rising to the surface and plucking people from sailing yachts . . . the *Britannia* incident is the only substantiated case of a giant squid attacking and killing people.'² Next, Cox's squid tale appears in the 2006 cryptozoological work *Mysterious Monsters of the World*,³ the 2007 compendium *The Mammoth Book of the Deep*,⁴ which derives the story from Bright, and finally in the 2009 book, *Ocean: Reflections on a Century of Exploration*,⁵ which cites Heuvelmans. The books describing

1 Peter Benchley, *Beast* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 153.

2 Michael Bright, *Man-Eaters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 266–9.

3 Vikas Khatri, *Mysterious Monsters of the World* (New Delhi: Pustak Mahal, 2006), p. 65.

4 Jon E. Lewis, ed., *The Mammoth Book of the Deep* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2007), pp. 64–6.

5 Wolf H. Berger, *Ocean: Reflections on a Century of Exploration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 261.



Figure 1. Cox and the other two survivors of his raft as they appeared in the *News Chronicle*. Unfortunately, the image is not good enough to present a decent look at Cox's scars.

Cox's story run the gamut of 'delightful pulp' to 'published by the University of California', demonstrating a notable degree of pervasiveness (Figure 1).

The story can even be found in children's books on the giant squid. For example, in *Tentacles! Tales of the Giant Squid*, the story is related in simpler terms, 'Some giant squid stories are even more deadly. During the Second World War, British sailors said a giant squid pulled a man overboard. He was never seen again.'⁶ The story is accompanied by a dramatic illustration of two sailors on a yellow life raft watching in horror as one of their shipmates is plucked off and held in the air by a large tentacle.

However, the truth of the matter is that Cox's squid story can be classified as an urban legend from World War II. An analysis of the historiography of the story reveals Cox's account to be almost certainly a fictional one. More specifically, Cox's story as presented in *Kingdom of the Octopus* does not match the first newspaper reports of the event. Furthermore, the accounts of other survivors dispute Cox's claims while presenting a far more plausible alternative to Cox's scars. Finally, the behaviour of the giant squid, *Architeuthis dux*, as described by Cox does not match the habits of the creature as documented by modern teuthologists, or squid scientists.

II. Historical background: the sinking of the Britannia

Following its strategy from World War I, the German Navy (*Kriegsmarine*) navigated World War II with the same policy of choking Great Britain's trade routes in order to subdue the maritime nation. To be successful, the *Kriegsmarine* had to overcome the vast numerical superiority of the Royal Navy. The most famous tool employed in this strategy

6 Shirley Raye Redmond, *Tentacles! Tales of the Giant Squid* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 14.

was the German U-boat. However, U-boat production was woefully inadequate to take on the entirety of trade interdiction. For example, during the first year of the war, there were never more than seven or eight U-boats deployed at one time.⁷

To compensate for the inadequate number of U-boats and conventional surface ships, the German navy employed a special group of raiders known as auxiliary cruisers. These were merchant vessels that were given hidden armaments, in addition to compartments and modules to disguise the profile of the ship. Combined with a foreign flag, these modifications allowed the raiders to operate in the world's oceans with a relative degree of stealth.⁸ There were nine of these auxiliary cruisers in operation throughout the war, with all but two being sunk before the war's end. One of these ships, the *Thor*, which in pre-war civilian life had been a fruit transport called the *Santa Cruz*, is the catalyst of Cox's story.

The *Thor* began her cruise on 6 June 1940, under the command of Captain Otto Kahler. Slipping out of the Baltic Sea, she made her way down to the South Central Atlantic, wreaking havoc off the coasts of Africa and Brazil. In this time, she sank eight Allied ships and survived two battles with British armed merchant cruisers.^{9,10} Then, on 25 March 1941, the *Thor* encountered the British transport *Britannia*.

The *Britannia* was a passenger liner, put to sea in 1921 and converted to a troop ship at the start of World War II. She had departed Liverpool, England, on 11th March under the command of Captain A. Collie, and was bound for Bombay, India.¹¹ Shortly after *Britannia* left a stopover at the Allied friendly port of Freetown, Sierra-Leone, she crossed paths with the *Thor*. Frank West, a survivor of the experience, gives the location of the meeting at approximately 10°38' N, 25°08' W, roughly 750 nautical miles west of Freetown.¹² In his book on the German raiders, cartographer and naval historian David Woodward gives the location of the encounter at 7° 24' N, 24° 30' W, slightly further north.¹³ According to West, the shooting started a little before 8:00 AM, and despite a spirited defence, by 9:20 AM Captain Collie had ordered the colours struck and that the vessel's compliment of nearly 500 people, including 200 crew, were to abandon ship. The German raider recognized the *Britannia*'s surrender and signalled it would allow a few minutes of respite to evacuate the vessel before performing the coup de' grace.¹⁴

As the *Britannia* was haphazardly putting her lifeboats into the water, a debate was raging within the mind of Captain Otto Kahler. Normally, the *Thor* would rescue any survivors from her victim ships. However, the radio room on the *Thor* believed that the

7 G.H. Pearsall, *The Effects of the World War II Submarine Campaigns of Germany and the United States: A Comparative Analysis* (Newport: Naval War College, 1994), p. 5, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a283407.pdf>

8 James P. Duffy, *Hitler's Secret Pirate Fleet: The Deadliest Ships of World War II* (Westport: Greenwood, 2001), pp. 12–3.

9 Duffy, *Hitler's Secret Pirate Fleet*, pp. 77–8.

10 S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea 1939–1945*, Vol. 1, Kindle ed. (Uckfield: The Naval & Military Press, 2004), pp. 5959–67.

11 Frank West, *Lifeboat Number Seven* (London: Kimber Pocket Editions, 1961), p. 13.

12 West, *Lifeboat*, p. 20.

13 David Woodward, *The Secret Raiders* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1955), p. 148.

14 Duffy, *Hitler's Secret Pirate Fleet*, p. 89.

Britannia had successfully radioed for help, meaning that British warships were inbound.¹⁵ While the *Thor* could easily prey on merchant vessels, she could not fight against a dedicated warship. For Kahler, taking the time to rescue the survivors could be a potentially fatal decision for his ship and crew. Furthermore, if a British ship were to arrive soon, then the survivors would be rescued anyway.

Many of the *Thor*'s crew were upset at the idea of leaving the *Britannia* survivors in waters known to be a habitat to large sharks. Captain Kahler even went so far as to send a coded message to his own naval headquarters informing them of the incident in the hopes that it would be rebroadcast, though this was not successful. According to James Duffy, Kahler was horrified when he discovered what actually happened, and those of the *Thor*'s crew who survived the war viewed the incident with regret.¹⁶ At the time, however, Kahler ordered a final salvo to be fired into the *Britannia* at close range to sink her, and then steamed off to avoid the incoming British warship.

Unfortunately for the now stranded passengers and crew of the *Britannia*, no British warship was incoming. While the *Britannia* had given off a distress signal,¹⁷ the response that the *Thor* detected must have been false. As a result, there were now hundreds of people in the water with no hope of immediate rescue. One of these people was R.E.G. Cox.

The first part of Cox's story is consistent across all versions of the event, including the account of another survivor R.H. Rowlandson. Unable to access one of the larger lifeboats, Cox and 11 other men clumped together on a small life raft 'no larger than a hearth rug'.¹⁸ They would spend 5 days in the water, before being rescued on 29th March by a Spanish ship, the *Cabos de Hornos*. However, what actually happened while the men were in the water is a topic of dispute.

III. Historiographic background: Lane, Heuvelmans, and Clarke

The most famous version of what transpired aboard Cox's life raft makes its first appearance in Frank W. Lane's *Kingdom of the Octopus*, published in 1960. Lane, a writer of popular natural history, records Cox's story as the pièce de résistance to the chapter of his book dedicated to the dangers that cephalopods pose to humans. The story appears to have been formulated through correspondence with Cox via a mutual acquaintance of Cox and Lane, Dr. Cloudsley-Thompson, a British biologist who will appear again later in this saga. Lane sets the scene by describing the sinking of the *Britannia*, before moving into the story of the squid attack proper:

One night a large squid threw its tentacles round a sailor, broke his hold on the raft and pulled him under. He was not to be seen again. Shortly afterwards Cox was attacked. He tells me: 'A tentacle quickly twisted around my leg and caused terrible pain. It removed itself almost immediately afterwards but left me in agony. This pain I think was caused by the suckers in the

15 Duffy, *Hitler's Secret Pirate Fleet*, pp. 89–90.

16 Duffy, *Hitler's Secret Pirate Fleet*, pp. 91.

17 West, *Lifeboat*, p. 21.

18 Frank W. Lane, *Kingdom of the Octopus* (New York: Sheridan House, 1960), p. 196.

tentacle for later I noticed where it had gripped me large ulcers had formed, and after I was rescued I remember the constant treatment which was given me for these ulcers which seemed to eat right into the flesh and were red and raw. I still have the marks to this day' (1956). Cloudsley-Thompson, who examined Cox's leg some two years after the attack, tells me that the circular scars were the size of a quarter dollar.

Cox lived to tell the tale because after five days in the water a Spanish ship found the raft and three survivors, Cox and two naval officers. The story was reported in the *News Chronicle* for October 21, 1941, and the *Illustrated London News* for November 1, 1941.¹⁹

This version of Cox's story has been presented here in its entirety, as will several other versions, so that the reader may reference the similar and contrasting features more easily for oneself.

Lane did not offer any comment on the story, other than his introduction of it as 'the most macabre cephalopod story I know'.²⁰ The newspaper articles on the experience are cited in a very matter-of-fact way and without elucidation. As will later be demonstrated, this represents a critical error in scholarship.

Cox's tale makes its next appearance via the French zoologist Bernard Heuvelmans. Heuvelmans is widely known as the father of cryptozoology, the study of 'hidden animals' that the scientific community has yet to recognize but that are attested to by anecdotal evidence such as folklore. Cryptozoology is viewed with a wide degree of skepticism by the scientific community because many cryptozoologists operate under the assumption that a legend about a creature must have a basis in fact. This is viewed as a violation of the basic principles of the scientific method, more specifically, the idea that one should not go into a study assuming the nature of a variable that is actually unknown. That is to say, cryptozoologists assume that the animal they are studying already exists and behaves in a certain way and seek evidence to confirm that assumption.²¹ Heuvelmans' relationship to cryptozoology is important in the analysis of the spread of the Cox story, because it is in that relationship we can find the mistake that led to the story's transmission.

When he writes of Cox's story, Heuvelmans begins by citing the two newspaper articles, and curiously noting that the tragedy was reported 'somewhat inaccurately'.²² This statement will be analyzed more carefully later. Heuvelmans then progresses to the tale proper,

One night, a large squid rushed at the shipwrecked, threw its whips around a sailor and in a sudden jerk pulled him off the raft. The unfortunate man, famished and exhausted, immediately went under and did not reappear.

One can hardly imagine the fear which then took hold of the other passengers. It only grew when, soon after the first attack, Lieutenant Cox was also attacked. He felt an enormous tentacle

19 Lane, *Kingdom of the Octopus*, p. 197.

20 Lane, *Kingdom of the Octopus*, p. 197.

21 Caleb W. Lack and Jacques Rousseau, *Critical Thinking, Science, and Pseudoscience: Why We Can't Trust Our Brains* (New York: Springer, 2016), pp. 170–2.

22 Bernard Heuvelmans, *The Kraken and the Colossal Octopus* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 252.

wrap itself around his leg, which immediately caused agonizing pain. For some unknown reason, the monster immediately released its grasp. However, brief as it had been, this contact had been enough to inflict on the officer terrible wounds. With its serrated suckers, the squid had torn from his leg, as though with a hole cutter, disks of skin and flesh the size of a penny.²³

Heuvelmans pauses here to speculate on the size of the squid in relation to the sucker wounds, before continuing with Cox's narrative,

After five days in the water, during which time most of the shipwrecked died one after the other, the last three were rescued by a Spanish vessel. Among the survivors was Lieutenant Cox, whose wounds required extended care. Two years after the event, they were examined by the English biologist Dr. John L. Cloudsley-Thompson. Even today, circular scars on the leg of the British officer bear witness to the horrifying attack of which he was victim.²⁴

Heuvelmans finishes Cox's story with the criticism of the 'arm-chair' experts that prefaces this article. For Heuvelmans, Cox's story is indisputable proof that giant squids will attack human beings on the surface of the water.

The next popular appearance of Cox's squid story is in the second episode of *Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World*, a 13-part television miniseries that first aired between September and November 1980. This is easily the most theatrical version of the Cox story, involving an interview with Cox's sisters and the aforementioned Dr. Cloudsley-Thompson, who retells Cox's story for the cameras. It begins with Clarke narrating the events that led up to the attack. Certain details are fumbled, such as stating that the *Britannia* was on a return trip to England in 1942 when the ship was sunk. After setting the premise, the narration gives way to an interview with Dr. Cloudsley-Thompson. The interview is transcribed as follows:

There were twelve of them there on the raft initially, and only three of them survived to the end of the five days. One of the most horrifying things that happened while they were lying there dying one by one of thirst, was one evening when they were attacked by a giant squid. An enormous shape appeared beside the raft, and a huge arm came over and snatched one of the men, tore him off the raft before anybody could do anything to save him, and presumably he was eaten. And they were still barely recovering from the shock of this when another arm or tentacle came over the side of the raft. He (Cox) saw it silhouetted against the starred sky, it forced itself on him, round his leg and round his body, particularly his right leg because that's where the scars were mainly that he showed me, (though he insisted they)²⁵ were around the rest of his body as well. And he'd of been pulled off just like the others (sic), only fortunately by that time people were alert, and so they grabbed on and held him. And so instead of him being pulled over the side, the suckers pulled lumps of skin off him – off his body; this is what caused this massive number of scars all over him.²⁶

23 Heuvelmans, *The Kraken and the Colossal Octopus*, pp. 252–3.

24 Heuvelmans, *The Kraken and the Colossal Octopus*, pp. 252–3.

25 Dr. Cloudsley-Thompson's dialogue becomes difficult to follow at this point.

26 *Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World*, 'Monsters of the Deep', Episode 2, Directed by Peter Jones, Michael Weigall and Charles Flynn (ITV Network, 9 September 1980), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdC1DP90OYs>

Listening to Cloudsley-Thompson tell the tale, one is reminded of the classic fish story that might be told in a seaside tavern, where the narrative of a real event has been drastically contorted for purposes of dramatic presentation. Certain dramatic elements are obviously fictional. For example, the squid's arm being 'silhouetted against the starred sky', is a poetic but scientifically dubious statement: how does a giant mollusc with no bones in its limbs raise its arms out of the water high enough to be silhouetted against the sky?

The same year that the Clarke miniseries was released, a companion book of the same title was written by Simon Welfare and John Fairly. It too contains a version of the events as described by Cox, somewhat different in that it quotes the newspaper accounts in a very selective way. The section is as follows:

They were faced with all the traditional nightmares of the ship-wrecked: a burning sun, a terrible thirst, attacks from Portuguese men-of-war, which Lieutenant Cox said 'stung like a million bees', and then, on the third day, the sharks appeared to pick off the wounded and those who had gone mad with thirst. After three more days, the sharks suddenly disappeared – not a relief but a prelude to the most appalling moment of all. Slowly, beside the raft, a gigantic shape appeared with huge tentacles. Then, deliberately, it reached out onto the raft and grabbed one of the Indian survivors 'hugging him like a bear'. Cox and the others made a futile attempt to tear the tentacles away, Cox himself suffering several sucker wounds, but the creature slowly took the Indian away. Apparently one man sufficed, for Cox and the two navy officers, picked up by a Spanish ship, lived to tell the tale.²⁷

Certain elements of this version demonstrate that Welfare and Fairly had read the newspaper accounts of the event. Of critical note are the quotes describing the Portuguese man o' war and the statement 'hugging him like a bear', which as we shall read in the next section, does not actually refer to a giant squid.

IV. The newspaper accounts: the missed red flags

The sinking of the *Britannia* received a wide degree of attention from the British press shortly after its occurrence in March of 1941. Many press accounts focused on the 23-day journey of lifeboat number 7.²⁸ Of the newspaper reports, there are two²⁹ concerning the case of Cox. The first is the 21 October 1941 issue of the *News Chronicle*, nearly 7 months after his rescue.³⁰ The story is a long, morbid account of the

27 Simon Welfare and John Fairly, *Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World* (London: William Collins Sons, 1980), pp. 106–7.

28 Grim Ocean Ordeal in Ship's Lifeboat, *Western Morning News*, 17 July 1941, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>. 23 Days in Boat, *Daily Mirror*, 16 June 1941, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>. 23 Days in Open Boat, *The Scotsman*, 16 June 1941, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>

29 Goss describes a third article in the *Glasgow Herald*, but states that it is uniformly the same as the London Article, even suggesting it was the result of a formal naval press release.

30 This proved to be an extremely difficult source to find. I am indebted to Valerie Haeder at the Library of Congress for uncovering the article in an offsite archive and sharing it with me.

experiences of the men on the life raft. It is told by Cox to a reporter of the *News Chronicle* (Figure 4) over a dinner table. However, at no point does a giant squid appear. Instead, we are treated to two entirely different monsters. First, Cox describes an encounter with an 'octopus',

I was hanging on in the water when I had a terrible pain. I was seized by an octopus. It got me by the leg, and when I got hold of the tentacle it stung my hand. I was stung on the head. It was like a million bees, and I have since lost nearly all my hair. I was also stung on the mouth. I heard loud screams from an A.B. called Joe. He was stung too.³¹

Stung by an octopus? Immediately it is apparent that something is wrong with his account. The way Cox describes the attack is substantially different from the version he gave to Lane. The true identity of this 'octopus' will be examined later.

After more time in the water, where the men are exposed to sunstroke and thirst, sharks begin to appear. On the fifth day, an Indian steward is bitten in half by a shark. Then, another animal comes to claim the remains,

He was hanging to the raft with his body in the water. Then I noticed he became very still and I saw muscles and flesh trailing in the water behind him. Both his legs had been bitten off and although he was still alive he slipped off the raft.

What followed was the most horrible thing anyone could see. A fish known as the manthir, or blanket fish, seized hold of the remaining part of his body. The blanket fish is like a giant ray. It hugs its victim like a bear. It folded its great fins around the Indian, hugged his body to it, and then proceeded to devour him before our eyes.³²

The animal Cox described is today known as the manta ray. It is common knowledge that this creature is filter feeder, that is, it eats microorganisms like plankton. What has happened here? Was the error Cox's, or the newspaper's?

Reading the *Illustrated London News* presents us with some elucidation (Figure 2). That version of the story mentions a stinging animal, but it is not an octopus, 'Mr. Cox, while hanging in the water, was stung on the leg, hand, mouth and head by a "Portuguese man-of-war," a poisonous jellyfish, which caused excruciating pain.'³³ This makes substantially more sense, and suggests that the first account may have been the result of some confusion with regard to the identity of tentacled sea creatures. This possibility will be analyzed by later authors such as Goss and Gantes. The manta ray makes another appearance, this time being described as a 'devil fish'. The *Illustrated London News* reports,

31 H. de Winton Wigley, 'Survivor Tells the Most Astounding Story of the War: Sharks Hunt Raft, Men Go Mad', *News Chronicle*, 21 October 1941, p. 1, Library of Congress.

32 Wigley, 'Men Go Mad', p. 2.

33 Bryan de Grineau, 'The Most Macabre Episode of the War at Sea: Marine Monsters Devour Men Adrift on a Raft', *Illustrated London News*, 1 November 1941, <http://www.ssbritannia.org/index.php/news-reports/8-the-illustrated-london-news-1-nov-1941>



Figure 2. The illustrations that accompanied the Illustrated London News article. These sketches were included in the Mysterious World episode “Monsters of the Deep,” with the Manta Ray surreptitiously cut out of the final picture.

until on the fifth day an Indian servant first had his legs bitten off by a shark and then, to add to the horror, a huge manta, or devil-fish, seized his body, folded its great fins round the victim, and devoured him.³⁴

Macabre as this event may indeed be, once again we are confronted with a serious lack of any animal resembling *Architeuthis dux*.

It is at this point we can return to Heuvelmans, the cryptozoological worldview, and the ‘somewhat inaccurate’ reporting of the British newspapers. To an unbiased reader, the huge discrepancies between the newspaper accounts and the Lane account would be a queue for extreme suspicion. The lack of a squid, the bizarre account of the manta ray, in addition to the sharks and the Portuguese man o’ war all point to a lack of consistency that calls Cox’s story into question. However, Heuvelmans is both *operating under the assumption that giant squids do in fact attack humans, and is seeking evidence to further prove this point*. Therefore, these discrepancies are not the fault of the newspapers. The credibility issue will be addressed in the following two sections, but for now, the lack of sceptical thought on Heuvelmans’ part must be criticized. While Lane did not give any indication of having examined the newspaper accounts, the fact that Heuvelmans saw these discrepancies and largely ignored them

³⁴ Grineau, ‘Macabre Episode’.

represents a huge error in scholarship. This is a particularly egregious error from Heuvelmans, whose preferred methodology, known as the *integrative method*, is to compile as many reports of an incident as possible, and then find the commonalities in those reports to construct a truly accurate view of what happened.³⁵ In this case, the lack of commonalities between the story as reported by Lane and the story as reported by the newspapers would necessitate more research before drawing any conclusions. Had Heuvelmans been more critical at the time, it is possible that the transmission of Cox's squid story would have simply ended there. However, because Heuvelmans was so determined to find documented evidence of a giant squid attack to disprove his critics, he overlooked the obvious inconsistencies and perpetuated a story that was quite likely untrue, which led others like Clarke and Bright to pick up the tale, thus creating what we would recognize as an urban legend.³⁶

Per Brunvand's definition, an urban legend is typically attributed to a friend of a friend. In this case, it would be Dr. Cloudsley-Thompson, who told the story on behalf of Cox to Lane. Cox, who died in 1971, does not appear to have actually spoken to Lane or Heuvelmans, meaning the story exists purely because Cloudsley-Thompson shared it. Indeed, it may be a misnomer to refer to 'Cox's squid story' when it is arguably as much 'Cloudsley-Thompson's squid story'. To return to Brunvand's definition, the squid story features an abrupt and somewhat confusing end, when the squid inexplicably releases its grasp on Cox's leg and the survivors are rescued by a Spanish ship. This further matches the narrative pattern of urban legends, which typically end quite suddenly. Thus, it can be safely argued that the story of the giant squid that attacked sailors during World War II meets the definition of an urban legend.

V. Goss and Gantes: sceptical examinations of Cox's story

Not every writer who encountered the Cox story was as credulous as Lane, Heuvelmans, or Clarke. At least two, Michael Goss and R.T.F. Gantes,³⁷ recognized the problems that the earlier newspaper accounts presented for Cox's squid. Goss, after reviewing the story, attempted to poke holes in it by calling into question Cox's character. Gantes took a more scientific approach, observing that the culprit of Cox's injuries was probably a Portuguese man o' war, while commenting that Cox was either delirious and/or did not have a very good understanding of sea life.

Goss analyzed Cox's story in the July 1985 issue of *Fate* magazine. While *Fate* is not exactly a bastion of academic credulity, we need not necessarily be concerned with the source because Goss demonstrates good analytical skills and a degree of skepticism in his writing, particularly on the issue of Cox. Goss is quick to observe that there are

35 Bernard Heuvelmans, 'The Sources and Method of Cryptozoological Research', *Cryptozoology* 7 (1988), pp. 1–21.

36 Jan Harold Brunvand, *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2001).

37 I am grateful to Michel Raynal for sharing these sources with me, as well as the pertinent parts of the Heuvelmans *Cryptozoology* journal article. I am particularly thankful for the French language work by Gantes, which would have almost certainly remained unknown to me.

numerous discrepancies between the newspaper accounts and the story that Cox told Lane. For example, of the 'stinging octopus', Goss notes that this was undoubtedly an error that was actually meant to describe the Portuguese man o' war.³⁸ Goss further takes umbrage with the notion of the 'manthir' killing a man, observing that the animal is a benign filter feeder.³⁹

To get to the bottom of these inconsistencies, Goss took the special step of contacting Cloudsley-Thompson, since he was the one who had related Cox's story to Lane. During the interview with Goss, Cloudsley-Thompson noted that Cox was 'a crazy type – very odd', and shared his suspicions that the events on the raft had permanently damaged Cox's psyche.⁴⁰ The angle here is obvious: Cox is crazy. The point is further driven home when Cloudsley-Thompson shared a story about a prank that Cox played on him involving a false telegram. However, the biologist maintained that Cox appeared to be legitimate when he shared his squid story. Indeed, the survivor was somewhat coy about the matter of the squid, almost seeming to seek confirmation from Cloudsley-Thompson that the circular scars on his leg in fact *could* be caused by such an animal. For his own part, Cloudsley-Thompson maintained to Goss that his opinion on the matter was still the same: he did not know of any animal besides a squid that could have created those scars. With regard to the manta ray attack, the professor told Goss that it was not unusual for wartime newspaper reports to get such details wrong.⁴¹

In his book *Le mystere des Pieuvres geantes* (*The Mystery of the Giant Octopus*), the French writer R.T.F. Gantes takes a slightly different approach than Goss when analyzing the newspaper reports. Gantes is extremely dubious of Cox's claims regarding the squid and sees in the newspaper accounts a more likely alternative. Gantes writes that the scars on Cox's legs, as described by Lane, were more likely caused by the Portuguese man o' war that Cox said, 'stung like a million bees'.⁴² As to the manta ray, Gantes comes to the same conclusion as Goss: it is impossible for this to have happened because the dietary habits of the manta ray will not allow for it.⁴³

Gantes concludes that the mistake is likely due to an extreme ignorance by Cox of marine life, and Cloudsley-Thompson of jellyfish stings.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Gantes suggests that Lane either did not look through the clippings or skimmed through them so quickly that he did not give much mind to the inconsistencies therein. Regardless, we shall return to Gantes theory that the primary cause of Cox's wounds was the Portuguese man o' war.

VI. The reports of the other survivors

The same year that Cox's squid story was first described in *Kingdom of the Octopus*, another of the three survivors of the life raft finally shared his version of events. Cmdr.

38 Michael Goss, 'Giant Squids on the Attack', *Fate*, July 1985, p. 39.

39 Goss, 'Giant Squids', p. 40.

40 Goss, 'Giant Squids', p. 40.

41 Goss, 'Giant Squids', p. 41.

42 R.T.F. Gantes, *Le mystere des Pieuvres geantes* (Paris-Montreal: Etudes Vivantes, 1979), p. 38.

43 Gantes, *Pieuvres geantes*, pp. 42–3.

44 Gantes, *Pieuvres geantes*, p. 46.

Frank West published his book *Lifeboat Number Seven* in 1960. He included an account from R.H. Rowlandson of the Royal Navy, who was in the same life raft as Cox. Rowlandson's 1942 account more closely matched the newspaper articles of the prior year, though Rowlandson's version was substantially less outlandish. As stated earlier, the book's author Cmdr. Frank West was another survivor of the *Britannia* sinking, although the trials and tribulations he went through occurred on a different craft from Cox and Rowlandson's little life raft. In the final pages of his *Lifeboat Number Seven*, West records Rowlandson's version of events.

The entirety of the several page account need not be repeated here. Suffice to say it is substantially more thorough than both the newspaper reports and Cox's story as related by Lane and later writers. Instead, several specific details must be examined. First, at no point in the narrative does a giant squid appear. This is the most obvious contrast with Lane's account of Cox's tale. Second, Rowlandson describes 'several visits from Portuguese admirals', which stung them during the night.⁴⁵ 'Portuguese admiral' is another name for *Physalia physalis*, most commonly referred to as the Portuguese man o' war. This confirms that Cox and the other survivors were stung by the Portuguese man o' war. Third, Cox's physical and mental states are detailed in three places. Rowlandson writes that on the 27th of March, 'Cox and Dwyer seemed able to support themselves only with great difficulty . . .'⁴⁶ The following day, 28th March, Rowlandson writes, 'Cox and Dwyer seemed very exhausted, both appearing to be rather light-headed, and one or two occasions tried to strike each other.'⁴⁷ It should be noted at this point that Rowlandson himself admits to not being of perfectly sound mind. Finally, on the 29th of March, he says, ' . . . Cox was so weak that he could only lie across the centre (sic) of the raft.'⁴⁸ These descriptions demonstrate that Cox was suffering from extreme injuries for a substantial portion of his time in the ocean. While Rowlandson does not specifically describe Cox's stings, Cox was clearly suffering substantially more than Rowlandson. By the time they were rescued, Cox was so weak that he had to be lifted aboard the rescue ship and was quickly carted away for medical attention,⁴⁹ an observation that will be corroborated later.

According to Rowlandson, on the 29th of March, the men were attacked by a shark. The Indian steward who was with them was bitten badly on the leg, and later died from blood loss. Later, the manta ray described by Cox in the newspaper reports does make an appearance. However, according to Rowlandson, while the ray was frightening due to its size, it did not attack and eat anyone.⁵⁰ It is important to note that the appearance of the shark and the manta ray occurred on the last day the men spent in the water and at a point when Cox suffered severely from his wounds. In the section 'A note on hallucination at sea', we will discuss how Cox's physical state might have influenced his memory of these events.

45 West, *Lifeboat*, p. 150.

46 West, *Lifeboat*, p. 152.

47 West, *Lifeboat*, p. 153.

48 West, *Lifeboat*, p. 153.

49 West, *Lifeboat*, p. 154.

50 West, *Lifeboat*, p. 153.

By itself, Rowlandson's account is not enough to disprove Cox's. When the two are put side by side on their own, the issue becomes one of 'he said/she said'. However, the fact that Rowlandson's account appears to be a more realistic version of the earlier newspaper accounts is somewhat damning, as is the fact that there is another survivor of the *Britannia* who heard what is likely the earliest version of Cox's story.

Rowlandson was not the only *Britannia* survivor to have direct interaction with Cox during and after the sinking of the *Britannia*. The most recently available written account of a *Britannia* survivor is *Pain for Leaven*, a memoir written by Alfred Warren, available to the public on the *S.S. Britannia* memorial website, which is maintained by Warren's son.⁵¹ Alfred Warren wrote his memoir from the notes he had compiled over his life (Figure 3), and finally completed them into a collected work some 25 years after the sinking of the *Britannia*. The account remained unpublished until the creation of the memorial website in 2011, when it was uploaded in its entirety by Ian Warren.

One critical point that must be noted is that this creates a possibility of cross-contamination between primary sources. Alfred Warren is known to have read and observed other accounts of the *Britannia* event, including the Arthur C. Clarke miniseries. A note written by Warren in 1980 details the discrepancies of the Clarke account with his own memory of what Cox had told him in a hospital in neutral Spain. For example, Warren does not recall Cox saying anything about a squid. Furthermore, on that occasion, Cox claimed it was the manta and not the shark that had bitten off the Indian steward's leg. Finally, Cox was badly stung by a Portuguese man o' war. This will be discussed in further detail below.

This means that in some cases, spaces where Warren's memories were vague or details that were unknown to him might be 'propped up' by information from these other accounts. However, Warren's memories of what Cox told him are substantially different from what Cox told Lane. To begin Warren's account, we note that Warren was one of the men who initially began the shipwreck experience on Cox's raft. After abandoning ship with a companion, Warren links up with Cox's raft. He writes,

Meanwhile Snowshoe and I drifted towards one of the merchantman's rafts, on which were Lt Davidson RN, Lt Cox, Army Lt Marks RN, a ship's steward, Lt Dyer, Lt Rowlandson, Lt Drysdale and now Snowshoe and I. We managed to hang on to the raft lines and for a small space were glad to be among our fellow humans.⁵²

This nicely matches the information on the raft's occupants given to us by Rowlandson in his account,⁵³ and may represent an instance of cross-contamination. However, Rowlandson's memory of Warren swimming away to join another raft on the following day cannot be considered an instance of cross-contamination, since Warren is himself the primary actor in that instance. Furthermore, Rowlandson could not have been

51 Ian Warren, Email to the Author, 19 October 2018.

52 Alfred Warren, *Pain for Leaven*, SS Britannia, ch. 4, <http://www.ssbritannia.org/index.php/personal-stories/alfred-warren/pain-for-leaven>

53 West, *Lifeboat*, p. 149.

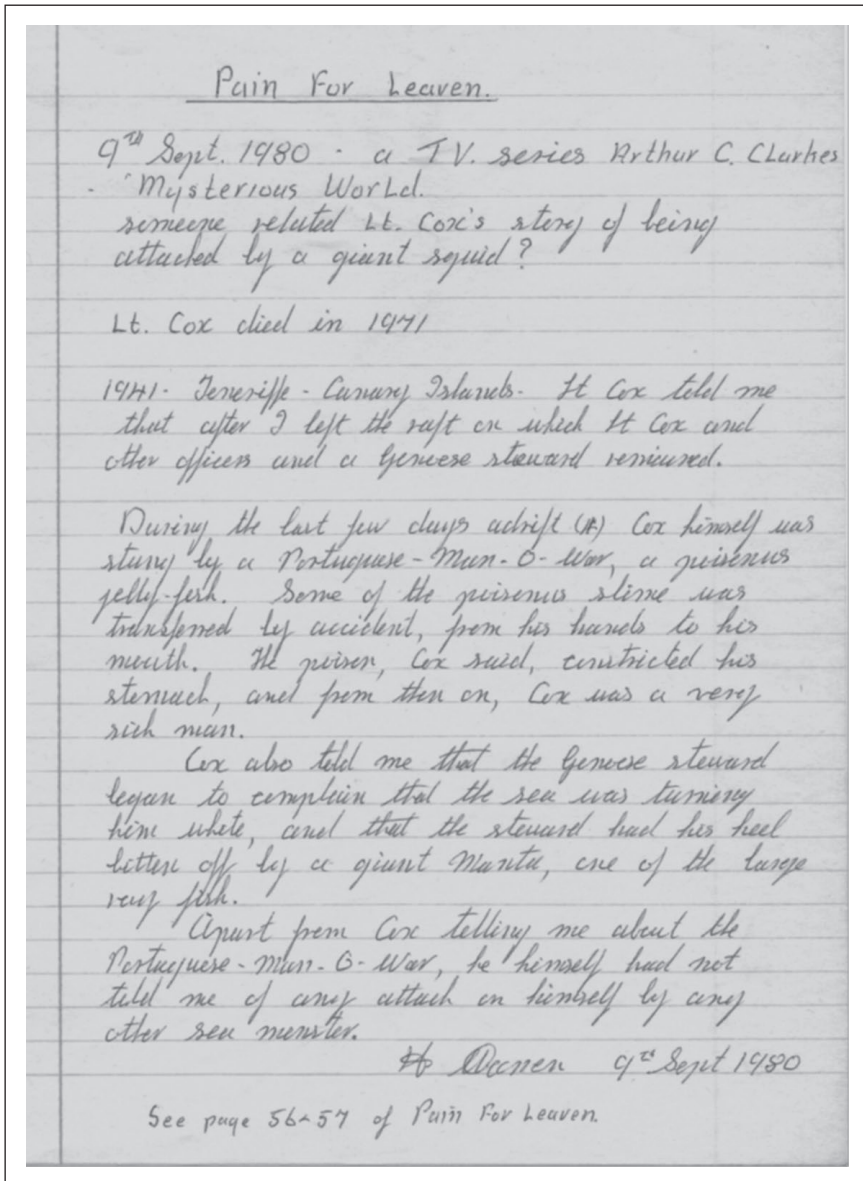


Figure 3. A Digital Copy of Alfred Warren's notes on the Clarke miniseries, generously provided by his son Ian Warren.

contaminated by Warren's account, as it was written substantially later than Rowlandson's. After the loss of his companion Snowshoe to the sea, Warren and another survivor make a swim for a larger lifeboat. Warren writes,

It was within moments of this incident that one of the Officers on the raft and I swam to the other raft, which had drawn closer, we clambered aboard. The new raft seemed to me to be part of the side of a wooden hut. The Naval Lt and I found a seat, there was a little more room on this raft, no one spoke on our advent aboard the new craft, the present occupants were concentrating on maintaining their seats, for now the waves seemed a little stronger.⁵⁴

Rowlandson confirms this action, describing the loss of the other F.A.A. rating (Snowshoe, Warren's companion), and the departure of Warren and the officer for the other raft.⁵⁵ It was the last Rowlandson saw of Warren until Warren was picked up by the Spanish ship, shortly after Rowlandson and Cox were. Indeed, Rowlandson claims it was he who insisted on continuing the search for survivors along a certain course once aboard the Spanish ship, suggesting that Warren may very well owe this fellow survivor his life.⁵⁶

In any case, we now have two accounts that match up quite nicely, demonstrating their validity as evidence. Warren does not see Cox again until their arrival in the Tenerife, the largest of the Canary Islands. Cox is being stretchered ahead of Warren towards a hospital, and Warren notes that Cox 'was in a bad way'.⁵⁷ This statement carries considerable weight coming from Warren, who had lost a chunk of his leg to a shark bite while being rescued by the Spanish ship. The exact nature of what happened to Cox is revealed later when Warren encounters Cox in the lobby of the hotel where the survivors have been bivouacked by the Spanish authorities. Cox invites Warren to his table for a drink and explains to Warren what happened to him. Warren relates,

Apparently, the day before they had been rescued he had seen a 'Portuguese-man-o-war' nearing the raft, this was a type of jellyfish that would extend above the water a membranous balloon to catch the wind, this was its means of propulsion. Below water it extended hundreds of tentacles with which to sting and kill its prey. The length of these sting feelers could be up to four feet across.

Cox, in an attempt to drive away these new perils had splashed wildly at the water, in so doing some of the tentacles had wrapped round his hand, the Portuguese-man-o-war then sheared off but left a reminder of his visit. Cox attempted to remove the stinging jelly-like traces from his hand, in his weakened condition the pain was agonising. He wiped his hands on his clothing and even in his hair in a frenzied attempt to ease himself. This latter move was the worst thing he could have done, the poisonous jelly slid down his face and a little even worked its way into his mouth and eventually to his stomach. He told me that his stomach felt as if a giant hand was crushing it. He began to lose control, he felt madness overtaking him, how long he was in this condition he had no recollection. The arrival of the Cabo de Hornos was the only thing that saved him.⁵⁸

No doubt Gantes would be pleased with Warren's version of events, as it essentially proves what he suspected to be true: Cox's wounds were caused by a very bad sting from a Portuguese man o' war, not the toothed suckers of a giant squid.

54 Warren, *Leaven*, ch. 4.

55 West, *Lifeboat*, p. 151.

56 West, *Lifeboat*, p. 154.

57 Warren, *Leaven*, ch. 10.

58 Warren, *Leaven*, ch. 10.

VII. A brief look at the monster(s) and the true culprit of Cox's wounds

Before moving on to a scientific analysis of the giant squid, let it be stated clearly that this is not a scientific paper by nature. It does not seek to add to the existing milieu of information about *Architeuthis dux* by recording information gained via field or laboratory research. Rather, it will focus on existing information about the giant squid as a measuring stick to gauge a specific eye-witness claim(s) regarding the creature. Observations made in this article may need to be reevaluated with new discoveries about the animal, some of which could potentially counter currently existing data.

Certain information, such as breeding habits, about *Architeuthis dux* are not pertinent to this article. Instead, the focus will be on hunting and diet, range, and behaviour at epipelagic depths (i.e. depths shallower than 200 meters). This information will demonstrate that while an opportunistic hunter, the giant squid is highly unlikely to prey on human beings because people are most commonly found at the surface of the water, where warmer temperatures are lethal to giant squid.

Pelagic fish and cephalopods are the most common food items of the giant squid.⁵⁹ The nature of these preys has led scientists to conclude that the giant squid is an opportunistic ambush hunter. This is supported by observations of the giant squid in the wild, which reveal it to be capable of sudden bursts of speed, striking aggressively with its whips at a perceived food item.⁶⁰ The present theory is that the giant squid will commonly hunt at around 900 meters below the surface during the day, rising to feed at 500–400 meters at night.⁶¹ This is a substantial distance from the surface of the water, even accounting for the possibility that squid might hunt at moderately different distances based on local underwater topography.

Giant squid do not typically rise to the surface of the water unless they are sick or dying. It is believed that giant squids inhabit regions with continental slopes and submarine canyons and thrive in the cool, deep water.⁶² *Architeuthis* is suspected to move to epipelagic depths only as a result of illness or injury, with the weakened squid caught by an upwelling that it is unable to swim free of. Once there, the squid begins to suffer from oxygen desaturation, which eventually results in death from suffocation.⁶³ This is why squid encountered at the surface of the water are typically lethargic and lacking in the speed and predatory aggression demonstrated at greater depths. Examples of this process can be observed on YouTube. For example, a video from South Africa shows a surfer

59 M. Regueira, P. Belcari and A. Guerra, 'What Does the Giant Squid *Architeuthis Dux* Eat?', *Hydrobiologia: The International Journal of Aquatic Sciences*, 725 (2014), p. 49.

60 Tsunemi Kubodera and Kyoichi Mori, 'First-Ever Observations of a Live Giant Squid in the Wild', *Proceedings: Biological Sciences*, 272 (2005), p. 2586.

61 Kubodera and Mori, 'Observations', p. 2585.

62 Angel Guerra, Ángel F. González, Santiago Pascual, and Earl G. Dawe, 'The Giant Squid *Architeuthis*: An Emblematic Invertebrate that Can Represent Concern for the Conservation of Marine Biodiversity', *Biological Conservation*, 144 (2011), p. 11.

63 Guerra, Gonzalez, Pascual, and Dawe, 'Emblematic Invertebrate', p. 8, 10, 16.

tying a rope around a wounded squid and taking it to shore, while another video from Japan exhibits a diver swimming alongside an animal and filming up close.⁶⁴

Given this information, it is extremely difficult to believe that Cox was attacked by a squid. Besides, being completely out of its normal hunting depth, the animal would have likely been suffocating, and thus incapable of initiating any kind of attack on the stranded men, and certainly not with the aggression described by Cox. Dr. Tsunemi Kubodera, the first researcher to film a giant squid in the wild, agrees. He states that the kind of squid attack as described by Cox is simply 'impossible'.⁶⁵

If Cox was not attacked by a giant squid, how then can we account for the scars on his body? If we return to Gantes' theory about the Portuguese man o' war and combine that with Warren's version of what Cox told him, then the answer seems obvious. The large, ulcer-like wounds described by Cox and accepted by Cloudsley-Thompson as injuries that could have been caused by giant squid are far more likely to be the result of an encounter with *Physalia physalis*. Although the Portuguese man o' war is from the same phylum (cnidaria) as the jellyfish, the man o' war itself is not a true jellyfish, but a colony of smaller organisms that is physiologically similar. According to medical literature on man o' war stings,

Close examination of the lesions reveals multiple venom injection sites. In most cases, lesions progress with 24 hours to local skin necrosis with formation of multiple scabs that disappear within 2 weeks, leaving a purplish or erythematous scar that may be visible for a prolonged period or permanent.⁶⁶

As Gantes observed, this would more closely match the wounds described by Cox in the first Lane account. Thus, we can conclude with a degree of near certainty that Cox was not attacked by a giant squid, but did receive several serious stings from a Portuguese man o' war.

VIII. A note on hallucination at sea

Why then, did Cox invent the squid story? Was it as Goss implied, an elaborate hoax from a known prankster? Or perhaps it merely stemmed from an extreme ignorance of sea life, as suggested by Gantes. It seems unfair to Cox to suggest that he was lying about the matter; he was after all very badly injured during a survival experience no sane person would like to endure. Gantes' suggestion seems the most plausible, but it can be built upon even more.

Remember that Rowlandson described Cox as being in a most severe state by the time that the Indian steward was attacked by a shark and the manta ray swam near the boat. It

64 Associated Press, 'Raw: Giant Squid Makes Rare Appearance in Bay', *YouTube*, 30 December 2015, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOXkUrhclcc>

65 Tsunemi Kubodera, Email to the Author, 7 November 2018.

66 Magali Labadie, Bénédicte Aldabe, Nathalie Ong, Aude Joncquiert-Latarjet, Vincent Groult, Amélie Poulard, Mathieu Coudreuse, Laurie Cordier, Patrick Rolland, Pierre Chanseau, and Luc De Haro, 'Portuguese Man-Of-War (*Physalia physalis*) Envenomation on the Aquitaine Coast of France: An Emerging Health Risk', *Clinical Toxicology* 50 (2012), p. 569.

is possible that in his delirium, Cox equated the two events in his mind as a singular occurrence. Hallucination at sea is an extremely common occurrence. Besides the severity of his poisoning, Cox may have ingested substantial amounts of saltwater, which in and of itself can cause delirium.⁶⁷

Hallucination was a frequent hazard for ship crews stranded at sea by German and Japanese submarines and raiders during World War II.⁶⁸ One of the best documented cases of mass hallucination at sea was that of the crew of the *U.S.S. Indianapolis*, the heavy cruiser sunk during World War II after delivering the first atomic bomb to its staging area. In that instance, shipwrecked sailors imagined everything from hotels in the water to the *Indianapolis* herself rising up out of the depths.⁶⁹ The primary culprit in that scenario was saltwater ingestion. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that simply being isolated in the middle of the ocean can cause one to hallucinate.⁷⁰

Based on this information, a speculative scenario can be created in which by 1956, Cox had convinced himself he was attacked by a squid while lost at sea. At first, Cox is badly stung during his encounter with the man o' war. While lying on the raft, wounded and suffering from exposure, he is likely to have ingested a certain amount of saltwater. These two events cause Cox to enter a state of delirium. A shark swims by and bites the leg off the Indian steward, as described by Rowlandson, and shortly thereafter a harmless manta ray swims innocently near the raft. However, perhaps in Cox's mind, it was the manta that bit the steward in half.

Sometime after the event and his initial interviews with the newspapers, Cox learns that manta rays are filter feeders and do not eat meat. What then did he see while on the raft? Perhaps it was a giant squid! Could a giant squid have also caused the scars adorning his body? Initially, Cox had been told that it was some type of jellyfish, but now he was not so sure! Cox goes to his friend, the biologist Dr. Cloudsley-Thompson, to see if maybe the biologist could corroborate the statement. After confirming that the wounds could in fact have been caused by a giant squid, Cox is now convinced of his version of events. Years later, this is the version of events that he tells Frank Lane, and from Lane the story goes to Heuvelmans, and so on.

IX. Conclusion

It is somewhat premature to suggest that all reports of attacks by giant squids are false. Such an assertion would require substantially more research than a single paper could provide. However, we can assert with a great degree of confidence that the giant squid story as told by Cox is in fact not true. Thus, I would not call it an old wives' tale, but

67 Doug Stanton, *In Harm's Way: The Sinking of the U.S.S. Indianapolis and the Extraordinary Story of Its Survivors* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), p. 181.

68 John Bunker, *Heroes in Dungarees: The Story of the American Merchant Marine in World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1995), p. 163.

69 Stanton, *In Harm's Way*, p. 195.

70 Proc R Soc Med, 'Effects of Sensory Deprivation', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 55 (1962), p. 1003, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1897523/?page=5>

rather, an urban legend. In this regard, it joins a wide panoply of weird tales from both World War II and maritime history. Like many other of those weird tales, it has a basis in truth. In 1941, R.E.G. Cox was on a ship that was sunk by a German raider. While at sea, Cox and his fellow survivors were attacked by various forms of sea life, including a shark which mauled one man to death in front of the other survivors. However, among the sharks and cnidarians, there was most certainly no giant squid.

What then caused the story to be spread? The first person to blame is Frank Lane. Lane does not appear to have checked the newspaper sources, which as we have discussed would have tripped off alarm bells for any scholarly reader, as it did for Goss and Gantes. However, in addition to Lane's sloppy or non-existent fact checking, other factors take a degree of responsibility as well. Rowlandson's account in *Lifeboat Number Seven* came out the same year that Lane published *Kingdom of the Octopus*, meaning that Lane may not have had the chance to read it. Furthermore, Arthur Warren's account was decades away from publication. Finally, the modern knowledge we possess of giant squids was not available to Lane in 1960.

While the lack of modern scientific knowledge also applies to Bernard Heuvelmans, other excuses do not. By his own bibliographic method, Heuvelmans has failed to provide an accurate analysis of the story. Despite reading the newspaper accounts, which clearly disputed Cox's claim, Heuvelmans waved them off as 'somewhat inaccurate' instead of engaging in further research, which could very well have led him to Rowlandson's account. This is a classic example of one of the great problems facing cryptozoology as a discipline: its habit of being overly credulous towards claims that even basic research can debunk. The over-credulity likely stems from the desire of these stories to be true, versus the physical reality of their truth.⁷¹ To demonstrate this, we need look no farther than the quote used in the introduction of this article. Heuvelmans is so eager to silence the 'arm-chair experts', that is, the sceptics who look critically at the idea of giant squid attacks, that he cherry-picks and overlooks obvious details that place Cox's account into question.

Clarke's perpetuation of the myth is more understandable. It does not behave TV programs to take a more sceptical view of things, but rather, to present the most outlandish stories in order to garner viewers. There was no point in checking whether or not Cox's claims were true, the story was sufficient as it was. The simple existence of the newspaper articles was enough to corroborate the story, never mind that they did not say exactly the same things as Cox.

What the failure of these authors demonstrates is that those of us who purport to be academics must take extreme care when dealing with anecdotal stories, particularly outlandish ones. While Heuvelmans' integrative method is not without its merits, eye-witness claims are subject to an extreme variety of influences; thus, they can be dangerous to use as fact. For this reason, physical evidence of a claim is vastly superior, because it is easier to analyze and present to others. We see this to some degree with Cox's scars. The physical wounds that Cox showed as proof to others of his claimed encounter with *Architeuthis* are just as easily turned around and used as evidence against such a meeting. However, to a

71 Caleb W. Lack and Jacques Rousseau, *Critical Thinking, Science, and Pseudoscience* (New York: Springer, 2016), p. 172.

certain degree, we are still left with the problem of limited verbal and written descriptions of these wounds. To truly prove the claim that Cox's scars were caused by a man o' war, we would need photographic evidence of them to compare to other instances of stings from that animal. Thus, it is possible that there is still one last chapter in this saga to be written.



Figure 4. R.E.G. Cox, a photograph presented in the *News Chronicle*.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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